

People and Choices

PREACHER : Canon David Grimwood, Church in Society

Rochester Cathedral
Sunday, October 15th 2006
Sung Eucharist : 10.30am

Today marks the final day of a month of action worldwide against global poverty. Today's gospel reading is about people who have choices, and how they make those choices. But who are 'they'? Who is the rich man?

If you woke up this morning with more health than illness, you are better off than the million who will not survive this week

If you never experience the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture or the pangs of starvation, you are ahead of 500 million people in the world.

If you can attend a church meeting without fear of harassment, arrest, torture or death, you are luckier than three billion people in the world.

If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof over your head and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75 per cent of the world.

If you have money in the bank, in your purse and spare change in a dish somewhere you are among the top eight per cent of the world's wealthy.

So, in economic terms, you and I are rich. I don't say this to make us feel guilty, just to point out where we are in relation to one another, and something of the choices open to us.

One way we make our choices is in our shopping. Every time we buy something, we are making ethical choices, whether we know it or not. So let's put together two shopping lists:

Our first list – and let's include the price tag

Help the world feed itself £5 billion

Provide the world with clean water? £5 billion

Provide universal primary education? £3 billion

It sounds like a huge amount of money.

But what about our second shopping list?

Let's see this one not as a one-off but as an annual standing order:

Maintaining our armies and military force £400 billion

On illegal drugs £200 billion

Perfume? £7 billion

So actually it's not about cost, or what we can afford. It's about choice. Choice is actually what marks out the rich from the poor. Are we prepared to make choices that will bring about change? Are we prepared to change?

I guess our first response is to say that this tackling the gross inequality in the world, and the poverty, poor health, unstable security, and so on – this is someone else's responsibility. And governments and agencies and banks and businesses have tried and are indeed trying.

Overseas aid – really important but there is simply not enough, and so often it is tied to particular agenda. It also leads to an unhelpful dependency. What about international debt? The Jubilee Debt campaign was very successful, but very few countries have yet actually benefited from debt relief. What about international trade and business? The World Trade Organisation simply cannot find agreement, and the latest talks collapsed very recently. This may reflect the nature of trade – it is not just about economic rewards, and sharing wealth. It is actually about power and about the stability of the global community. We don't need reminding that the thousands who died on 11th September five years ago were killed at the World Trade Centre. It is about relationships and culture, and shaping people's lives as customers. Yet trade brings empowerment and sustainability, especially if poorer communities can find a fair reward for their labour, skills and perseverance.

Fair trade is one choice we can all make in our shopping choices. What an impact that makes on the lives of growers and farmers - like the a banana co-op in the Dominican Republic which improved pay and conditions for workers, and provided health care and sickness benefit, increased wages, and poured money back into the village to provide clean water and a school. It provides sports equipment and facilities. This has increased the efficiency of workers and therefore the product. One farmer said 'regular income means regular food, clothing, schooling for my family and twice as much money as I had before now I am in the co-op.'

The imbalance in who enjoys the earth's riches is also a moral issue, because it is about justice and fairness, which flow from decisions we make day by day. As Bob Geldoff has said, the scandal is that there is poverty and hunger in a world of plenty. In today's first reading, we hear Amos condemning the Israelites for hypocrisy in worshipping God while condoning injustice. He goes on to say that it is impossible to worship God in spirit and truth without committing to correcting that injustice – seek good, not evil, that you may live, let justice flow like a stream, and righteousness like a river that never goes dry.

It is about practical action, not as an extra, but flowing from our own choices we each of us make, our own commitment and faith lived out day by day.

Look again at the reading from Mark. Jesus loved the man – his riches were not a barrier to love or respect from others. However, Jesus points out that his riches may be a barrier to him, and to us. Jesus reaches out to him and to us with respect and honour and understanding, and with deep love. There is no instructing, no haranguing, but an invitation to commit ourselves to follow him in the choices we make, so that we are set free and the injustice and scandal of poverty is transformed into the glory of God and for his Kingdom, for the dignity and honour of all God's children and people.

And this is fundamental to the love and righteousness of God. It is God's love and presence that renews and transforms us. We cannot put everything right. What we can do is allow God's grace and love to flow through us, so that God's justice flows through our lives and actions as we discover one another through respect and dignity and love – not through power, status or riches. Which is why the core of our worship here is our response to the invitation of Jesus to share his very body and blood together, just as we are, modelling in action what cannot be bought, only chosen.